GETTING DOWN TO BASICS
JOHN 20:1-18
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He had been, literally, her salvation. It is said that a man's life flashes through his consciousness as he dies. In her case, her best and dearest friend died - her savior - and her life came flowing back out of the deep recesses of memory. He had taught her to overcome that - that living out of a wretched past that made a hell of the present. But now he was dead, and what she had been before came back like a flood. The little girl in the rough streets of Magdala: the young woman who learned quickly that sailors would pay generously for her favors: disowned by her family: the miserable, lonely women who could not stand herself and whose only relief seemed to be that affection and attention she received as a practitioner of her profession: the woman other people said was sick - possessed by demons.

But then a man by the name of Jesus had come into her life. He loved her - and alone - accepted her as she was; until slowly she came to love and accept herself. Until slowly she was free of her past and there was no need to continue her self-hating, self-destroying behavior. She was literally saved - actually reborn - because of the honest, strong love of a man named Jesus. And so she had followed him: she had followed him into Jerusalem. She had seen with her own eyes how the city had turned against him: she had seen him arrested and spat upon and whipped. And when his friends backed away - she stayed, at the foot of his cross as he died.

There were a lot of broken hearts on that gloomy Friday - but none, but none, with the single exception of his mother's, so desparately broken as hers.

And so it is not surprising that Mary Magdalene, not more than 36 hours after his death, in that gray dawn before the sun appears found his tomb. The others either didn't know where it was, or more probably knew but were too afraid to even contemplate going there. Mary wasn't afraid: she had nothing to lose the only thing that mattered to her was gone:

the only light in her life of darkness was snuffed out: her savior was dead.

When she came to the tomb in the semi-darkness, she noticed that the large stone which covered the opening had been rolled away. Immediately she went to the place where the others were hiding and told them what she had seen. "It wasn't enough to kill him - now they have taken the body." Peter and John ran - saw the empty tomb - some things jelled in their minds - and returned convinced they had witnessed the evidence of a miracle to end all miracles.

But Mary returned to the tomb to resume her vigil of grief. And then, in the depths of despair, in her misery and hoplessness, Jesus Christ,whom she presumed dead, called her by name.

Hers is a special story because it is personal and intimate. It is, for me, one of the most touching stories in all literature, and in terms of Celebrating Easter Sunday it may be the most important of all. It takes the resurrection of Jesus Christ out of those categories with which we are most comfortable - philosophy, theology, biology, and places it squarely in the embarassingly intimate context of the life of a very real human being - which is the place where we are most uncomfortable. The dead Jesus was alive enough to say her name. And she was honest and courageous enough to answer.

John Calvin, father of Presbyterianism, and one of the greatest minds ever to think intellectually about the Gospel of Jesus Christ once observed that the creeds of the church ought to be sung instead of recited. That is to say; the great, central doctrines of Christianity came out better when they are affirmed poetically, artistically, with body, spirit, mind and emotions; rather than dealing with them solely as a matter of intellect, and intellectual understanding.

Never is that observation more relevant than on Easter Sunday. In the first place the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so central to the

Christian Faith that all else is commentary. Apart from the resurrection there would be no New Testament, no Church: Jesus might occupy a seat of prominence in the pantheon of history's noble martyrs, but even that's rather doubtful. Everything that has been done in the name of Christianity for 2,000 years; everything that is done today, including the life of this particular congregation, grows out of the basic conviction that Jesus Christ did not stay dead.

In the second place the resurrection defies explaining and therefore understanding. Not that men haven't tried. There is no end to man's efforts to explain how it happened: how a man who was supposed to be dead got up and walked away. It's interesting that the Gospel writers didn't even give it a college-try. In fact they document the rather embarassing fact that the ones who should have been ready for it weren't. They didn't expect it: they had difficulty believing it, particularly when all they had to go on was the testimony of someone else.

Taking the historical/analytical approach there were only two things that can in any way be called hard facts. The first is that Jesus was dead. Even the most skeptical historians concede that there was a Jesus, that he ended up a victim of crucifixion, and that crucifixions were a notoriously effective method of execution. People didn't faint on Roman crosses, to be revived later. He was dead.

The second fact is that his friends became convinced that he rose from his grave. First, a relatively small group; and then a much larger group.

With those two bits of hard data the analytical approach comes to a grinding halt, and the person who wants to maintain a posture of intellectual honesty is left with the conclusion that something fantastic happened in between. The writers, while staying a respectful distance from the actual event do try to describe the other events that surrounded it. But their accounts differ and contradict each other. And inevitably it has been suggested that someone took the body. The authorities perhaps - to

keep the disciples from taking it. In a delightful chapter in his book "The Christian Agnostic", Leslie Weatherhead deals with and demolishes all the rational explanations of the resurrection. About this one he wrote: "God raised him from the dead; said Peter, preaching within a short time of the crucifixion and within a mile or so from where it took place. If this were not true, why in heaven's name did not someone come forward and say, 'Don't be silly, I can show you his body.'"

As for the suggestion that the disciples themselves secreted the body away, if there is anything more incomprehensible to me than the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is the idea that this pathetic little group of frightened men assembled in a room and concocted the story and then went out and died for it.

Something happened: something that convinced them that Jesus who was dead, was dead no longer. The victim of cruelty, hate, bigotry - was the victor. On the basis of that something, eleven very unlikely men went out and literally turned the world upside down. For Mary, what happened that morning near the garden made all the difference in the world. For the disciples it meant the complete transformation from men who were hiding behind a locked door, into followers of Jesus Christ who were afraid of nothing. Whatever happened it convinced them that they had nothing to fear, ever again. A world in which a resurrection happened is a whole new world.

It was a world, for instance, in which the ideas of Jesus - which sounded so alien and out of step - were suddenly the right ideas. The cause was not lost. Love is not the eternal victim of hatred. Goodness, compassion, integrity, kindness were for real: lasting, ultimate realities, not just the noble dreams of a martyred rabbi. And because of that they could live with a new sense of hope and confidence.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote that "A real Christian who believes should do two things: dance out of the sheer sence of joy, and fight out of

the sheer sense of victory." That needs saying today. For joy and confidence seem, in our day, to be casualties of rampant boredom and cynicism James Smart describes the disciples, between the crucifixion and resurrection as men "groping in the dark, standing helpless, before the towering mystery of evil, feeling hopeless and inadequate in the face of sin and chaos and man's ruthless inhumanity to man."

That says it pretty well for us I think. There is a lot about our world that is discouraging and depressing and senseless. On Maundy Thursday the newspaper carried the account of a terrorist raid in Israel that resulted in the death of eighteen people: men, women and little children. It seems sometimes that man's inhumanity to man hasn't even slowed down in 2,000 years. The cross of Jesus Christ is a continuing reminder that uncategorically evil things do happen in the world. Easter is not the time to try to pull the wool over anyone's eyes with a lot of talk about flowers and man's nobility. History proves that to be hopelessly bankrupt. What the resurrection meant and means is that love will win. There may be set-backs. Ignorance and hatred may win a skirmish here and there. But love is the ultimate power.

The resurrection meant that the struggle ahead was worth it: that the disciples could commit their lives - with confidence - to the cause of Christ. Recent polls continue to reveal that a startling number of American people have concluded that it's no use standing up for what they believe is right and good in the public domain: that dishonesty and corruption are so deeply a part of our political processes that it is foolish to build one's personal philosophy on the concepts of fairness, integrity and responsibility. That is to say, Americans are becoming cynical. And their cynicism is turning them inward - away from any stance of commitment and involvement. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the struggle is worth it. It may seem that it's stretching the point to get from Easter to Watergate. But I am suggesting that it is precisely in the midst

of political and social ambiquity that Christians who are confidently committed need to stand firmly. It does matter. It is worth it to stand for what you know is good.

The cross is the symbol of goodness suffering at the hands of evil. But that's behind us on Easter Sunday and we can fight out of the sheer sence of victory.

The cross symbolizes death: death as a personal reality - and death as a force in the world with a power of its own. But that, too, has been put in a new perspective by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That last and deepest fear has been banished. Of course we will die. But that prospect no longer needs to fill us with fear and trembling. For Jesus Christ has shown us that the love of God overcomes even the power of death. So we can dance: joy - real joy is possible.

The closing message of the World Council of Churches Assembly several years ago put in words the meaning of the resurrection in life: "We do not know what is coming to us, but we know who is coming. It is he who meets us everyday and who will meet us at the end. Therefore we say, Rejoice in hope."

Now the disciples did not put it in these terms. But I am suggesting to you that whatever happened to them after the crucifixion of their Lord was so radical that it changed them entirely: it changed their sorrow into joy: it changed their fear into courage: it transformed cynicism into commitment. And I am suggesting that the resurrection of Jesus Christ means that same thing today: that to know Christ as Risen Lord is to live in joy and courage and commitment.

Finally, however, we are left with the question with which we began: the one we avoid: the one preachers back away from in favor of more manageable topics like good and evil, death and freedom. We are left, finally, with the whole matter of personally believing and dealing with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are left, that is to say with a woman weeping

beside an empty tomb. I don't think Mary Magdalene would have been very impressed with the philosophic thesis that the empty tomb meant good was more powerful than evil. I don't think Mary would have been helped much by most of the sermons preached on this day.

For all our vaunted analytical prowess, I am not convinced that knowing that the tomb was empty on Easter morning makes much real difference in a person's life. What mattered to Mary was the fact that Jesus Christ called her by name. That's what Easter is all about. A person, a voice calling each of us by name. Edmund Steimle put it this way: "Not just a fact, a rather sterile fact, actually, that Christ is risen from the dead, but that Christ is alive to call you by name, to call me by name, for all our names are caught up in that one name , 'Mary'".

That's getting down to basics. Easter, for Mary, meant that Jesus Christ was a reality she could continue to rely on. Easter meant that the personal love and acceptance that had changed her life did not die, and therefore she could continue to live in the freedom he had given her. He had been, literally, her savior. Easter meant that he was still and forever would be - her savior.

So, for you and me the resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes a reality, not when we hear about it, but when we put ourselves in a position where we are confronted by him personally. When we, like Mary, follow him - suffer with him - watch him die for us - he will come to us and call us by name. If the lovely story of Mary Magdalene has anything to teach us it is this: the Risen Christ comes to those who love him enough to follow him. He did not appear to the people who crucified him: he did not come to the vast majority of Jerusalemites who were neutral. He came to that little band of the faithful who had followed - starting with Mary Magdalene.

One thing more her story teaches us and that is that we experience the Risen Christ in order that we might live courageously and joyfully in the world. When he came to Mary she did a very normal thing. She tried to

hold on to him so as never to lose him again. But he said: "Don't cling to me - Go to my brethren - go back to life - and know that I am always with you. " Mary accepted that. Frightening as it must have been she went to the disciples and said "I have seen the Lord."

That is the greatest mystery of all. The Risen Christ goes with us. His presence in the world is in us - in you and me. He lives through us. He is revealed in the world when we live as his people.

So let us celebrate - the victory of good over evil: life over death: love over hate: let us celebrate in joy and confident commitment: let us celebrate a voice out of death that calls each of us by name. For Christ our Lord was dead but is alive.

OUR FATHER, we are grateful for this day; for each other;for your love. We are grateful for a world in which a resurrection has happened, and for the new life of joy and hope we are given. We are grateful father, that our Lord who was dead, is alive. AMEN